

## **Veronika Fassler RG-50.028.0016**

### **Summary of Interview**

**Veronika Fassler** born in Eisenärzt in the Bavarian Alps, 100 km from Munich, Germany. Father: Sebastian Shürf, born 1899 in Oelsnitz, Germany, died November 1990. Mother: Josefa Shürf (née Sterhflinger), born 1897 in Sierksdorf, Germany. Siblings: older brother Sebastian; sister Marta; brother Herbert. Places mentioned: Dachau, Ingolstadt, Traunstein.

Veronika's father, Sebastian, worked as a machinist in a wood factory. Josefa was a dressmaker. Sebastian, from a Catholic background, became a Bible Student around 1928-1929 (from 1931 known as Jehovah's Witnesses). In 1935, he was sent to jail for nearly a year in Traunstein, after the priest from Inzell reported that he and other Witnesses celebrated the Memorial of Christ's death. To care for the family, Josefa did laundry, ironing, and dressmaking in addition to the rent she received. At school, Veronika and Marta's teacher threatened to notify the authorities because they refused to say *Heil Hitler*.

After Sebastian's release from prison in 1936, his employer rehired him because of his honesty and good work. In 1937, he was called up for military service. He told the company commander that he was politically neutral and that he could not take up any weapons or salute the flag because he had already given his oath to Jehovah God. For this, Sebastian was put in the military prison in Ingolstadt for about six months. By the time Veronika was 11, her mother had left the Catholic church and been baptised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. She had seen what a good man her husband had become after becoming a Bible Student. During this time, the family home was under constant surveillance by the Gestapo.

In 1939, Veronika's father, Sebastian, was again called up for military service, but his employer interceded and he was relieved from military duty to return to work. Although surveillance by the Gestapo continued, Sebastian obtained Witness literature and hid it in the vegetable garden. Veronika would see her father reading the literature and the newspaper, so when later interrogated, she would say only that she saw her father reading the newspaper. The family would visit other Witnesses and, as the children played outside, the adults could discuss Bible topics.

In 1942, the Gestapo came to Sebastian's workplace to arrest him. The Gestapo later went to the house several times to thoroughly search for the Witness literature. In 1943, a Gestapo agent named Mr. Grimm took Josefa away to a prison in Munich. On the way there, he made her watch as he punished a young Polish boy accused by a German girl. The boy was hung.

Veronika was 17 when her mother was taken away. Veronika went to the Gestapo headquarters to ask where they had taken her mother and whether her father was still alive, since the family had never received any notification or letters from him. When asked why she did not say *Heil Hitler*, she replied that if she did, it would show that she belonged to the same organisation that took her parents away. She was told by Mr. Grimm that her father was in Dachau and that she would not be allowed to see him. He told her that her father was under the jurisdiction of Dr. Leitz, the public prosecutor, and that her mother was in a prison in Munich. Veronika travelled to Dachau to see her father but was told that he was in solitary confinement. Veronika went to visit her mother in prison and reassured her that she would return home to look after her

siblings. From there, Veronika went to see the public prosecutor, Dr. Leitz, in the Palace of Justice. He first interrogated her for two hours about her father's activities and to find out if she knew any other Witnesses. Veronika recalled that Dr. Leitz said that he wished that everyone was one of Jehovah's Witnesses because then there wouldn't be this terrible war. The next day, he gave Veronika permission to see her father in a subcamp of Dachau. Veronika's father was only skin and bones, living on bread and water. He was overjoyed that Veronika could visit for ten minutes. Veronika told him that Mother had also been taken but that she was OK. Sebastian asked Veronika to bring him a Bible, so she returned to see the public prosecutor and got permission to bring food and a Bible to her father.

Veronika made a cake using all of the family's butter, egg, and sugar rations. After examining the cake and Bible, Dr. Leitz gave her permission to bring them to her father. Thereafter, Veronika was allowed to visit her father every four weeks and bring him a cake. Veronika found out that her mother had been transferred to a different subcamp of Dachau and was in a cell with five other Witnesses. They were taken to a tailor shop in the town of Dachau each day to sew mattresses, and sometimes the tailor would give them extra food. Veronika was able to visit her mother there sometimes.

Since Veronika's older brother, who was in the German army, was coming home for two weeks' vacation, Veronika went to Dr. Leitz to request that he ask the Gestapo permission for her mother to be released for those two weeks, but the Gestapo would not allow it. Dr. Leitz suggested allowing Father out instead because he had not yet had his trial. He said that if her father did not return after the two weeks, then Veronika's older brother would pay for this with his life. So, Veronika and her brother went to Dachau and brought their father home for two weeks.

In 1944, Dr. Leitz informed Veronika that the time for her father's trial had arrived and that they would request the death sentence for him. Veronika asked a family friend who was a *diplôme d'ingénieur* and whose Witness wife was in prison to write a letter on behalf of her brother in which he would plead for his father's life. The friend wrote the letter, and then Veronika mailed it to her brother. The trial was one week away, and it would take four weeks for the letter to be signed and returned. Veronika felt it was Jehovah's direction when the trial was postponed for four weeks. On the day of the trial, Veronika's father was accused of speaking to various people about the Bible and giving them Witness literature. The judge said that he had received a letter from the accused's son, a soldier fighting for the country on the Russian front, pleading for his father's life. Veronika's father received a seven-year sentence rather than a death sentence. He was taken back to Dachau to work at an ammunition's factory, but he told the commandant that his conscience would not allow him to work there. The commandant told him that he'd be shot for refusing to work there, so instead, the commandant decided to take Father to his own home to work on his small farm.

Three months later, Veronika's mother was tried and given a 16-month sentence. Although she had already served the sentence, she was still not allowed to go home. Although Dr. Leitz was no longer dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses' cases, Veronika asked him to speak to whomever was in charge in order to get her released. Josefa returned home a week later.

As the end of the war approached, Sebastian returned home, having been freed by the Americans. Two weeks later Veronika's brother returned from Stalingrad.

Veronika's brother, Sebastian, was the first one to be baptised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses after the war. Veronika married in Germany. Her husband died before she emigrated to the U.S.A. with her daughter. In 1954, Veronika began to study the Bible with Lee and Heaven Scott, two of Jehovah's Witnesses in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1955, Veronika attended her first assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses in Yankee Stadium in New York and was baptised in 1957. Veronika has found that many people, including Germans, do not believe that the Holocaust really happened, but she looks forward to the time when God's Kingdom will bring a change for the better earth wide.